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ABSTRACT

Although current efforts in counseling Native Americans appear to either overgeneralize issues or lack universality in cross-tribal application, one viable counseling approach is the continuum concept of heritage consistency, which assesses the extent to which an individual's predominant lifestyle and behavior reflect major elements of his/her historical tribal culture. A Native American's position on the continuum, determined according to individual knowledge and customs, appears to impact self concept, acculturation, internal conflict, identity, and willingness to seek professional counseling. Heritage consistency must not be used as just another means of categorization, but as a structure in achieving individual awareness and identity. The degree of heritage consistency can suggest related counseling and/or social concerns such as: difficulties in English language expression; lack of basic learning, decision-making, budgeting, and/or assertiveness skills; and unfamiliarity with dominant culture expectations. The degree of heritage inconsistency can suggest: denial of being Native American; lack of pride, identity, and/or a belief system due to lack of heritage culture experience; and pressure to adopt heritage consistent or non-Native American values. Major counseling issues for Native Americans in general include alcoholism; cultural discrimination; alienation; fear of failure, success, or ridicule; and distrust toward non-Native American helping professionals. (NEC)

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HERITAGE CONSISTENCY AS A CONSIDERATION IN COUNSELING NATIVE AMERICANS

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HERITAGE CONSISTENCY AS A CONSIDERATION IN
COUNSELING NATIVE AMERICANS

ABSTRACT

Current counseling techniques with respect to cross cultural differences within the Native American minority population, appear to either overgeneralize issues or lack universality because of tribal specific situations.

The development of a construct with the characteristics of sensitivity for client specific situations while not maintaining a prejudicial structure is imperative.

One viable structure is the continuum concept of "heritage consistency". Native Americans appear to exist on a continuum with respect to their individual knowledge and customs. Their position on the continuum appears to impact issues such as self concept, acculturation, internal conflict, identity and willingness to seek out professional counseling personnel.

One's "heritage consistency" can be assessed using a multi-factored assessment. In order to promote effective therapy, counselors need to be sensitive to a clients "heritage consistency" for the purposes of establishing appropriate client self awareness, motivation and change blueprints.

INTRODUCTION

Literature concerning the effectiveness of assisting Native American students in today's social or academic environments is sketchy and appears to lack positive resources for establishing awareness toward effective problem resolutions in helping professional environments.

"The important efforts in responding to the Native American counseling dilemma appear sociological with a flavor focusing on cultural differences" (Bryde, 1971). The compared differences, rather than positive similarities with the dominant culture become the area of attention and helping professionals are forced either (a) to assume a "paternalism" paralleling the efforts of past or current governmental policies toward Native Americans in general or (b) because of the lack of cultural education (Native American client or helping professional) restrict needed approaches and resources in favor of rescuing Native American clients with a "Missionary plight". In addition the literature prophesizes failure with statements, such as "because of the Native American's Tribal experience of oppression and exploitation.....it is doubtful that the social worker, regardless of racial identity, could bring about any major change". (Lewis, 1971)

"The discussions concerning rituals and customs are important in promoting better understanding of prospective Native American clients but have the effect of forsaking tribal and individual identity." (Bryde, 1971). The generalities can be punishing. What is right for one "Indian" is not necessarily right for "all Indians".

Current efforts in counseling Native Americans appear either to offer generalizations that are impractical for implementation in therapy or to provide specific techniques that lack universality in cross-tribal application. This

article supports an additive relationship between Native American specific concerns and current counseling theory.

Beginning with the individual as the primary focus for any counseling approach, the authors explore the continuum of heritage consistency--inconsistency as: 1) a structure for self-assessment of client cultural identity; 2) a tool for establishing therapeutic goals; and 3) a means of cultural self-definition more accurate than the current concepts of urban or traditional.

Characteristics are itemized, such as: 1) being raised on a reservation; 2) maintaining participation in current cultural events; and 3) a sense of pride and knowledge of individual history. They are included in a comprehensive checklist to facilitate client placement on a continuum of heritage consistency. The primary counseling concerns of Native American (alienation and value conflicts between the minority and dominant culture) are clearly registered and structured, allowing more accurate implications for therapeutic directions.

The model suggests a counseling tool responding to cultural implications in a manner that also responds therapeutically to individual Native American identity.

In effect, because recommendations appear as a non-comprehensive and non-individualized series of suggestions, the net result is a reduction of helping professional effectiveness, and the inherent possibility of creating a new system of prejudice. Helping professionals merely have another list of preconceived notions regarding how to assist Native Americans in counseling and/or social environments.

One often overlooked individual Native American characteristic that is crucial in developing understanding in helping professional settings is the degree to which the individual's lifestyle reflects his/her respective tribal culture. The words "Traditional" or "Non-Traditional" are no longer appropriate.

More appropriate designations are as follows:

Heritage Consistent Native American (HCNA): A Native American whose predominant lifestyle and behavior reflects major elements of the milieu of his/her respective historical tribal culture.

Heritage Inconsistent Native Americans (HINA): A Native American whose predominant lifestyle and behavior reflects major elements of the dominant non-Native American culture.

These designations are not absolutes. Native Americans are affected by several cultures. To rigidly classify them would be to establish yet another prejudicial system.

Ideally, in helping professional settings, any Native American must first be regarded not as a member of a tribe or race, but as an individual. However, a critical element of individuals is "Heritage Consistency." Theoretically, value characteristics indicating heritage consistency persist on a "Consistency Continuum." Therefore, individuals are not categorized in exclusive groups, but rather, possess value characteristics of both Heritage Consistency and Heritage Inconsistency. Any position on the continuum is viewed as acceptable. The value of the continuum in discussion regarding Heritage Consistency or Heritage Inconsistency is directly related to the degree it is used to establish individual awareness of self-identity and growth. We may engage in activities from both ends of the continuum.

A note of caution: The value of the continuum is not so much where an individual places him/herself on the continuum, but the vented concerns and feelings that he/she has in the self-placing process.

FACTORS INDICATING HERITAGE CONSISTENCY

The degree of heritage consistency can be determined according to the number of positive responses an individual makes to the following items. The greater the similarity of experience, the greater the heritage consistency.

1. Childhood development occurred on or near respective reservation(s).
2. Extended family members encourage participation in traditional religious and other cultural activities.
3. Individuals engaged in frequent visitations to respective reservation(s).
4. Family home base is presently on or near a reservation.
5. Individual has participated in Native American cultural events (i.e. singing, dancing, give-aways, pow-wows [wacipi's]).
6. Individual maintains regular contact with and/or was raised in an extended family setting.
7. Individual's name reflects past Native American customs and traditions.
8. Individual was educated on or near the reservation or in a Native American boarding school.
9. Individual engages in social activities primarily with other Native American "Heritage Consistent" persons.
10. Individual has at least a minimal knowledge about his/her Native American Culture or possesses a desire to learn.
11. Individual possesses elements of personal pride extracted from the Native American culture.
12. Individual incorporates elements of historical belief and practices into his/her present religious philosophy.
13. Individual places a low priority on the accumulation of possessions and other materialistic goods.

14. Individual considers sharing with extended family members a necessity.
15. Individual uses shyness and silence to indicate respect.

POSSIBLE ISSUES IN COUNSELING THE HERITAGE CONSISTENT

The degree of heritage consistency can suggest a series of related counseling and/or social concerns:

1. The individual may have a support system and/or sense of security limited to the extended family or "home" reservation.
2. The individual may have difficulty expressing him/herself through the English language. He/She may tend to use more non-verbals in expressions.
3. The individual may refuse to engage socially with anyone other than HCNA persons.
4. The individual may lack social skills in communicating with non-Native Americans or other Native Americans in general.
5. The individual may lack basic learning skills.
6. The individual may have difficulty incorporating the value of education into his/her own belief system.
7. The individual may perceive a conflict between motivation to learn and obtaining acceptance "back home on the reservation".
8. The individual may possess a prevailing fear of failure and the subsequent repercussions from both extended family members and reservation members.
9. The individual may perceive non-acceptance or estrangement from those who are not "Heritage Consistent" and from the same reservation. (This is in conflict with the motivation to establish a general sense or cohensiveness among Native Americans.)

10. Material goods may fail to reinforce long term goal-setting or behavioral change in the individual.
11. Hiding emotions may be perceived by the individual as a positive personality trait.
12. The individual may lack budgeting skills with time and financial resources.
13. The individual may lack decision-making skills.
14. The individual may lack assertiveness skills.
15. The individual may have difficulty in planning future goals.
16. Paternalism from the government agencies and maternalism in the extended family may diminish the individual's sense of personal pride and responsibility for problem resolution.
17. The individual may be unfamiliar with the dominant culture and its expectations.
18. The individual may lack positive development role models.

SOME PROBLEMS IN IMPLEMENTATION

Many of the Native American specific counseling recommendations have attempted to respond to special considerations for only the Heritage Consistent Native American. These recommendations are often not appropriate for the Heritage Inconsistent Native American.

CASE STUDY "A":

> An HINA teenage female, adopted and raised since childhood by a non-Native American family, away from her reservation, experienced different concerns than her natural sister, who was raised in an extended family setting and educated on the reservation. While in attendance at the pow-wow (wacipi), the HCNA sister delights in singing and dancing and has established pride and identity through her native culture. Because of unfamiliarity and apprehensive fear of the dominant society, she lacks motivation and techniques for a broader sense of achievement.

The HINA sister is not interested in participating in the heritage consistent cultural activities; she lacks knowledge of the customs and feels guilty for being unable to speak and understand in her native tongue. Feeling alienated from the cultural activities, she leaves to attend a drive-in movie in town with non-Native American friends. Here she still feels more comfortable than in her native culture.

Clearly the implications for counseling each of the sisters is different. The HCNA sister requires skills for coping with the dominant culture, the HINA sister suffers value and identity conflicts. The conditions for her own self acceptance are more difficult to obtain.

It is imperative that the helping professional consider the degree of heritage consistency as a secondary consideration within the helping session. The primary concern of establishing rapport and understanding the individual is tantamount to any counseling approach. Additionally, making assumptions before collecting appropriate data can lead to embarrassment and resistance for potential clients, as illustrated in the following example:

CASE STUDY "B":

> A Native American student came in to visit with one of the authors in the Counseling Center. The counselor, assuming the student to be heritage consistent because of his long hair, heritage consistent last name and style of dress, spoke and said good morning in the Dakota (Lakota dialect) language. The student looked confused and felt embarrassed. He admitted feeling guilty for not knowing his native language. The author had wrongly assumed consistency and acted accordingly before he had established an accurate understanding of the individual student.

POSSIBLE ISSUES IN COUNSELING THE HERITAGE INCONSISTENT

The degree of heritage inconsistency can suggest the following issues:

1. The individual may engage in denial of being Native American.
2. The individual may suffer from alienation or lack of identity.

3. The individual may possess guilt for not knowing or not participating in his/her own Native American customs and/or cultures.
4. The individual may suffer a distinct lack of pride.
5. The individual may resist the offer of others to re-engage with heritage consistent activities.
6. The individual may experience pressure to adopt non-Native American values.
7. The individual may experience pressure to adopt heritage consistent values or beliefs.
8. The individual may possess a negative image of the Native American people in general.
9. The individual may lack a support system for being Native American.
10. The individual may lack a belief system due to the lack of heritage culture experience.

MAJOR COUNSELING ISSUES FOR NATIVE AMERICANS IN GENERAL

1. Alcoholism, with the individual, family or social relationships.
2. Sense of distrust toward non-Native American helping professionals.
3. General sense of cultural discrimination.
4. Some degree of alienation (lack of identity).
5. Lack of successful Native American role models.
6. Fear of failure, success or ridicule.
7. Frustration experienced when others respond to them as members of a race and not as individuals.
8. Possible sense of separation and alienation from tribe and extended family as a result of personal commitments to education or achievement of personal successes.

SOME FINAL SUGGESTIONS

With sensitivity for the individual and the individual's "Heritage Cultural Consistency," the following suggestions are pertinent for bringing about awareness in a helping professional setting:

1. Respond to the Native American as an individual first, but with a sensitivity for heritage cultural consistency concerns.
2. Recognize that a positive relationship of mutual trust is the first Essential requirement before continuing.
3. Engage in a discussion regarding real and ideal self-placement on the continuum.
4. If incongruency persists regarding real and ideal self, establish contracts to promote behavioral change.
5. Discuss the relationship between the degree of Heritage Cultural Consistency and futility in the individual's life goals.
6. Use self-placement on the continuum as a tool for establishing individual identity and an opportunity to marshal support for the individual.
7. Encourage the individual to examine his/her concept of self and the impact on the current milieu between the Native American cultures and the non-Native American dominant society.
8. Encourage the individual to identify those resources that "recharge" or support current identity.
9. Before meeting with the individual, do not make assumptions regarding:
   a) The preconceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of any counseling techniques.
   b) The individual's attitude toward you (silence may not indicate a lack of respect for you).

c) The individual's attitude toward self (shy body language may not indicate a poor self-concept).

d) The individual's attitude about being Native American (feeling proud or ashamed).

e) The individual's level of knowledge and familiarity with his/her cultural legacy.

10. Be sensitive to the body language of both yourself and the individual.
11. Do not assume responsibility for the individual (do not get pulled into the maternal expectations of the individual).
12. Be sensitive to your own biases regarding Native American people and attempt to disallow their interference in the sessions.
13. Recognize that humor exists as an integral part of Native Americans cultures.
14. Recognize that counselor availability as perceived by Native Americans is not restricted to an eight-hour work day.

The concept of heritage consistency provides a unique tool for self-definition and acceptance as well as a pragmatic blueprint for therapeutic change. It serves to complement current counseling theories that focus first on the individual and second on concerns related to the individual. The key is to use heritage consistency not as just another means of categorization, but rather as a structure in achieving individual awareness and identity.

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